

Value Added Curriculums:

Developing a Strategic Relationship with Economic Development
Organizations and Missouri Higher Education Institutions

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A chief goal of Missouri's efforts towards sustainability, growth, and economic prosperity should include a strategic collaboration with higher education institutions located within the State. To be sure, communities, both rural and urban alike, are in need of leadership, and resources to meet the enduring challenges of a rapidly expanding, highly competitive global economy. Thus, there is a critically identifiable need for higher education institutions to play a stronger role in Missouri's economic development efforts. By engaging in universal, collaborative, and strategic relationships with higher education institutions, Missouri's economic development efforts can become more regionalized, specifically targeted, and ultimately, more effective.

As a means to support the 2010 Strategic Initiative for Economic Growth, launched in Missouri by Governor Nixon, this white paper sets out to achieve three main objectives:

1. Economic Development efforts throughout Missouri – at all levels, both urban and rural – must be universally linked with Higher Education;
2. Higher Education Institutions throughout Missouri must be posed to support and sustain community development goals within their respective regions; and
3. A general concept - identified in this white paper as "Service Learning" - must be utilized as a chief component towards the attainment of our State's economic development goals.

As will be demonstrated in this white paper application, service learning can link higher education institutions and local communities. Service learning is a form of experiential education in which students participate in service that addresses community needs and increases students' understanding of course materials through application and reflection. As illustrated by Peters, McHugh and Sendall (2006), service learning offers tremendous benefit to the public sector during a down economy. As stated in their research: "The service-learning environment demonstrated benefits of service learning for student experiential learning, benefits that are comparable to business internships at larger, private sector organizations. By promoting long-term relationships with local area small business, healthcare, education, and other non-profit organizations, these organizations were receptive to modifying their more routine volunteer service functions to develop management-based projects that would provide learning laboratories for the students while simultaneously serving the organization with value-added management skills."

As a means to better provide an illustration in regard to the proposed concept of service learning, please consider the following case study. The case study outlines a project conducted between a rural community development organization and a higher education institution, both located within Missouri, in the spring of 2010.

In March 2010, a community development organization serving the rural community of Cuba, Missouri, engaged in a joint research collaboration with Columbia College. Students participating in the college's undergraduate business management course embarked on an 8 week research project aimed to support efforts in identifying strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats for Cuba, Missouri, and its surrounding region. During an initial presentation to the class of 27 undergraduates led by the college's Assistant Professor of Business Administration, a representative from the rural community development organization addressed students and posed a key challenge: Given the current SWOT Analysis of the community, how can a road map be established to increase the quality of life for those who work and reside within the rural community and its surrounding region?

As a result of the initial dialogue, the students were set to conduct research posed to provide an analysis in regard to the current state of the quality of life within the region. Like many Missouri communities, both rural and urban alike, Cuba, Missouri, faces challenges towards maintaining a sustainable middle-class, high unemployment, lack of resources to support an under-educated workforce, high poverty rates, and high substance abuse rates. Knowing this going in, the research project was divided into five core components of quality of life: Education, Safety, Community, Middle Class Development, and Health and Wellness.

Initially, each of the twenty-seven students was required to write a paper on a particular challenge facing the community and to identify its solution. ***The result: twenty-seven students, twenty-seven fresh, educated perspectives and twenty-seven implementable solutions; all at no cost to the community.*** From there, students were divided into groups with the task of improving the education, safety, community, middle class and health and wellness of the rural community. The culmination of the service learning project was a presentation of the students' recommendations to the rural community's development organization.

Through collaboration, members of the rural community – by means of its community development organization - and students at Columbia College committed themselves to enriching the life of others. The scholastic insight provided by students has led to positive change for this rural community. Further, a template was established that offers a ***fully developed model demonstrating how service-learning can help communities - both rural and urban alike - understand, establish, and identify key economic development objectives such as how to improve the overall quality of life for their citizens.*** Attached as an addendum to this paper are key research questions, which can be utilized by rural and urban communities alike, to identify key economic development objectives such as how to improve the overall quality of life for their citizens.

This integration of service-learning with the business administration curriculum has created a unique learning opportunity where everyone benefits. More importantly, research from the Corporation for National and Community Service suggests that college experience and substantial volunteering are associated with higher levels of civic engagement. When colleges and universities incorporate volunteering into the educational practice known as service-learning, the relationship is even stronger. Therefore, not only will the State of Missouri see an immediate economic impact through the vehicle of the service learning projects, we are simultaneously instilling the values of civic engagement in each participating student. This extends the product life cycle of the project to the life-span of the student, which is a tremendous economic benefit to the State of Missouri.

Bridging a strong, sustainable collaborative relationship between our State's economic development efforts and our higher education institutions is imperative for the growth and prosperity of our great State. Without doubt, by engaging in key practices such as Service Learning, the value added component for communities all across the State, both urban and rural alike, will be real, effective, and game changing. Missouri holds a vast number of tremendous assets, one of which is the ability to create and sustain value for its institutions, businesses, and citizenry. To be sure, Service Learning will endow a key component of economic development which can be utilized as a means to further our State's storied tradition of cultivating a world-class business climate.

Key Research Questions

- Does the community have an effective workforce development system in place that leverages the resources within the community?
- Does the educational community provide ongoing and training opportunities to the residents?
- Does the business community provide well-paying, career ladder positions? Do residents have access to small business opportunities?
- What metrics will the community utilize to measure educational achievements? Is education accessible to all residents of the community? To what extent is the concept of “lifelong learning” promoted?
- Does the community offer housing that is affordable and attainable for people of all income levels, life stages and abilities?
- To what level does the community promote festivals, venues, events? To what extent do all members of the community have access to entertainment venues?
- Do all residents of the community have access to high-quality healthcare services?
- Is there community-wide commitment to personal fitness and wellness? Do residents have access to recreational centers and/or walking trails? Is a strong system of support in place for the disabled and elderly?
- How can the community utilize the local assets within the region, such as industry clusters, natural resources, etc. to promote a sustained way of life?
- What natural assets within the region can the community utilize to create and sustain a “green” way of life?
- Does the community have a strong relationship with the constituent body? Has the community effectively harnessed the leadership talent within the community?